

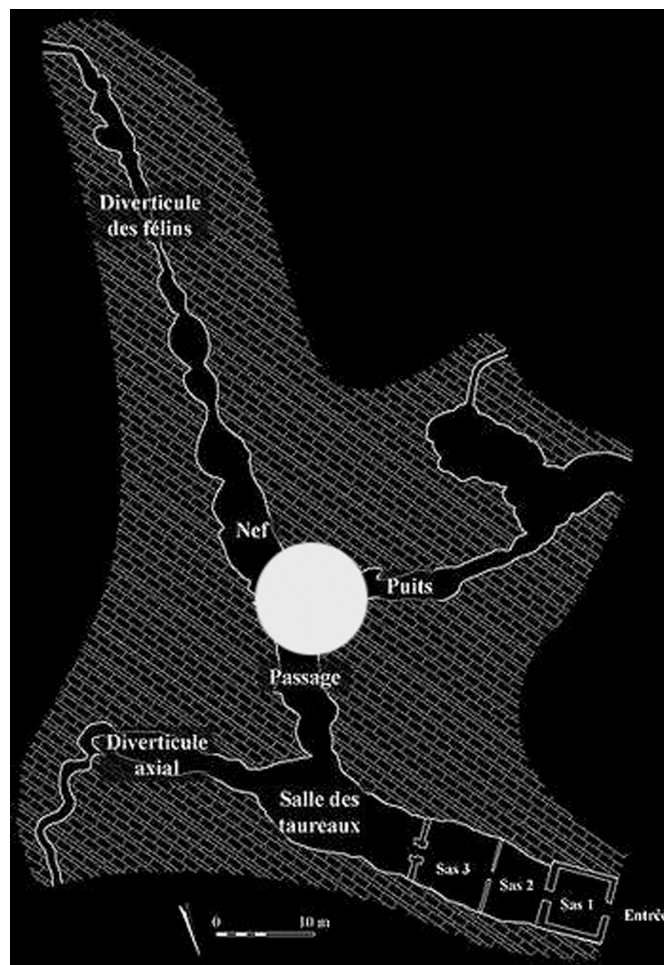
# ***Immersive Excess in the Apse of Lascaux***

Paper delivered October 30<sup>th</sup> 2021 3pm at Museo e Istituto Fiorentino di Preistoria in Florence Italy as part of *Art Before Art: L'uomo Cosciente e l'arte delle origini: con e dopo Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti* on the occasion of the anniversary of the paleo history book by art historian and critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, *The Conscious Man*, organized by the Fondazione Centro Studi sull'Arte Licia e Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti (Lucca) and the Museo e Istituto Fiorentino di Preistoria (Florence)

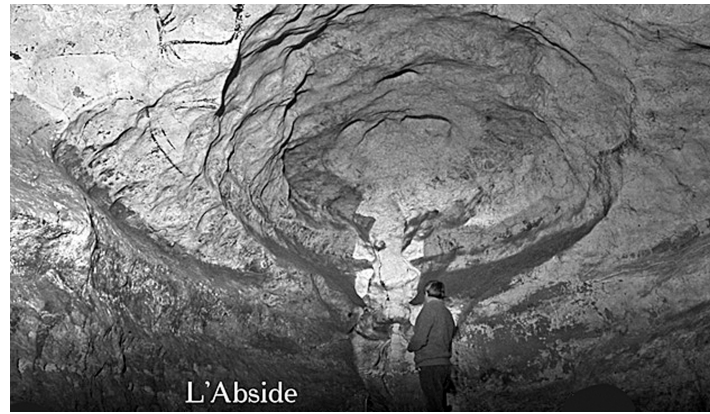
by Joseph Nechvatal

drawn & expanded on from the book

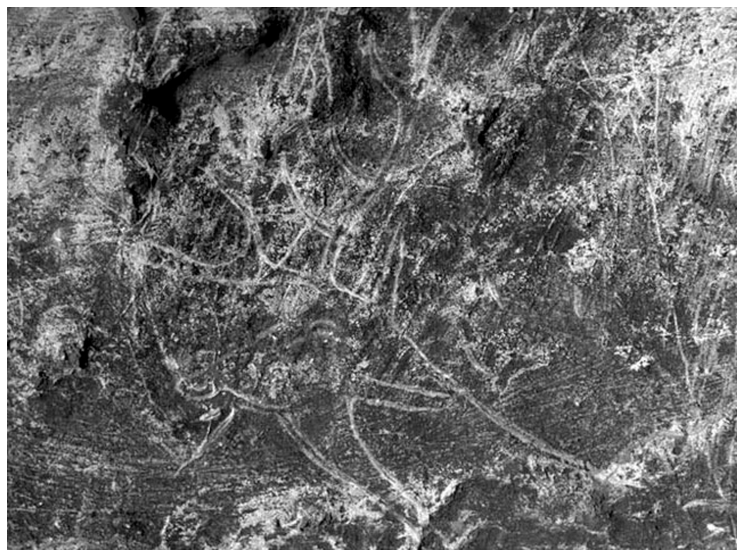
*Immersion Into Noise*



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux on Lascaux Cave plan

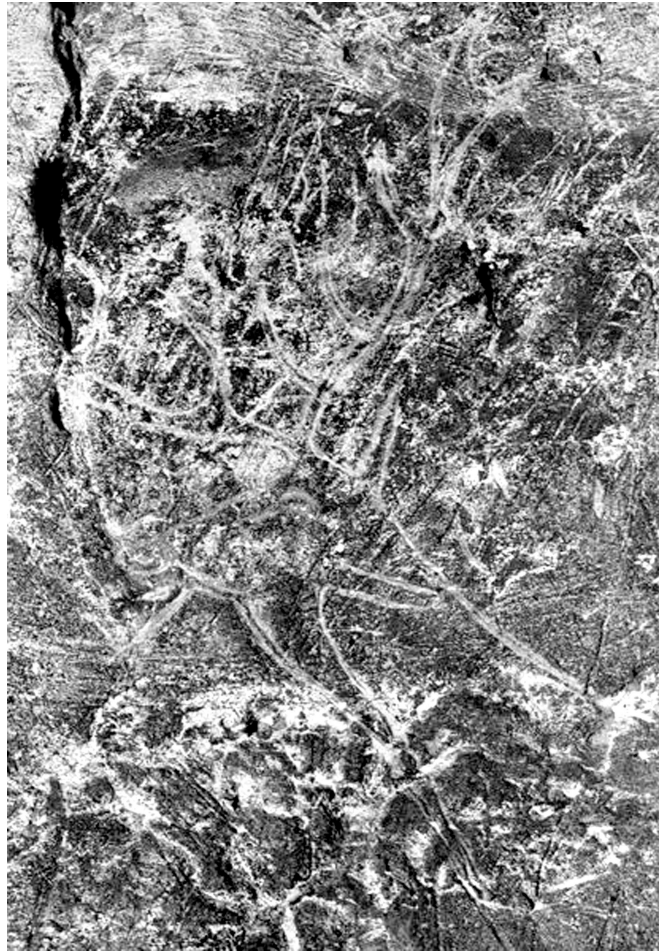


The Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux drawing of sole reindeer represented in Lascaux (head)





Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux drawing of sole reindeer represented in Lascaux

My paper, *Immersive Excess in the Apse of Lascaux*, will investigate the complex, elegant but difficult, divinational gazing situation I found in the *Abside* (Apse) of the Grotte de Lascaux, which I received by request, the rare privilege of seeing in person on the permission of the French Cultural Minister.<sup>1</sup> It is not reproduced in any Lascaux Cave simulations, and rarely reproduced in photographs (the ones I am showing here being the exceptions) and so remains a deeply underground interest within pre-history cultural studies.

The relatively unknown Apse is a roundish, semi-spherical monochromatic chamber, shaped like those adjacent to Romanesque basilicas. It has been covered over centuries on every wall surface (including the ceiling) with the visual noise of thousands of

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Nechvatal, J. (2009) *Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing

entangled, overlapping, finely engraved drawings of animals mixed with abstract lines into a phantasmagorical presentation suitable for shamanistic gazing; an ocular technique based on visual exasperation that takes the unclear seriously as a conduit to occult probabilities. By looking at this prehistoric (but sophisticated) cultural place through the dirty lens of the phantasmagoric visionary, spectrums of imaginary spaces open up; from the nimble array of actual forms to formless voids of infinitude. All of this is based on its challenge to the normal retinal hierarchy of representational figure and abstract ground.

This visionary challenge is at the very heart of my book *Immersion Into Noise*, published in 2011 by Open Humanities Press with the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.<sup>2</sup> Although my own somewhat similar drawing practice (that I will show you at the end of this talk) proceeds the one I found in the Apse, the Apse confirmed for me my *outré* anti-pop approach to representational art that I came to conceptualize in the book by applying my passion for noise music to the visual, architectural and cognitive domains.

I had first read about the Apse in Georges Bataille's writings on Lascaux Cave.<sup>3</sup> It particularly interested me when Bataille said that we cannot know the full meaning of the art-before-art seen in Lascaux, but that we can sense its maker's desire to challenge us and stun our eyes. Lascaux, with its marks of animal transit intermingled with a sense of death and/or fecundity, was for Bataille the place in which consciousness became self-consciously expanded into the larger field we now call art.

Bataille said that what was curious about the Apse was that the artists "abandoned their oeuvre to the next to come after them in an ant-like activity" yet "they did not engrave their figures with less conviction or care."<sup>4</sup> Obviously the generations of drawers at delicate work here, did not work from life models but from the overlapping introspective depths of their visual memories. Likewise, the Apse seemed to call upon me to construct a mnemonic interpretation of its tightly woven, intricate abundance: what I came to call its *latent excess*. But even while aided by its monochromatic tonality, after introspectively

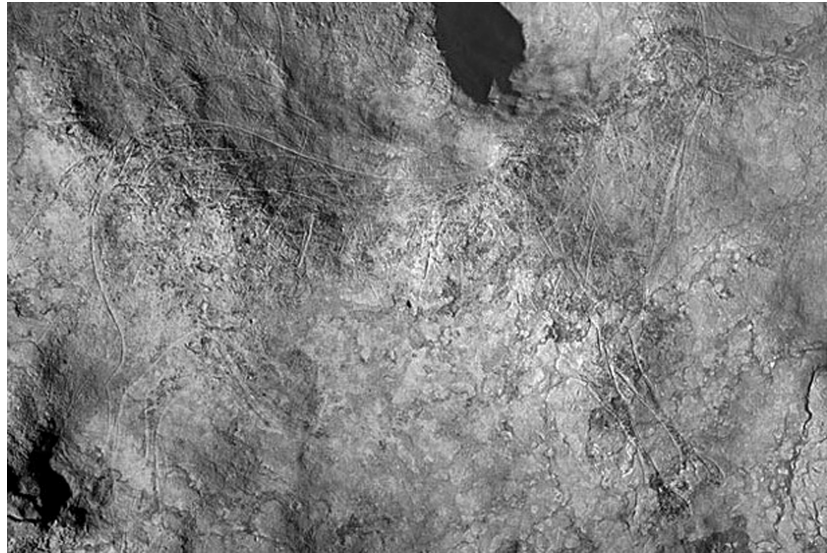
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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion Into Noise*, (Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press, 2011), 76-89.

<sup>3</sup> Bataille, G. 1955. *Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*. Geneva: Skira & Bataille, G. 1978. *Oeuvres Complètes: Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*. Paris: Gallimard.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes: Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1979), 59.

synthesizing the overlapping and imploded individual parts into that coherent mnemonic whole, the Apse retains for me a provocative discord I associate with Punk attitude. The Apse continues to tantalize my mind with an obscure and withheld signification. This gives it its visionary power.



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux drawing of a horse

The prehistorian Mario Ruspoli, in his book *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, calls the Apse the “strongest, most richly symbolic” of all the spaces which make up Lascaux.<sup>5</sup> The ceiling (which ranges from 1.6 up to 2.7m high as measured from the original floor height) is so completely and richly bedecked with an excess of engravings that it indicates that the prehistoric people who executed them first constructed a scaffold to do so.<sup>6</sup> This indicates to me that the Apse was an important sacred part of the cave, and indeed Ruspoli calls it the “most mysterious and most sacred” of all the inner spaces which make up Lascaux.<sup>7</sup>

After seeing and thinking about it, I hypothesize that an ability to visually detect, from within the visual noise of wild nature, the signal of a form of an animal, by allowing unexpected configurations optically to emerge, was an essential talent of the successful hunter.

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<sup>5</sup> Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, (New York, Abrams, 1987), 146.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, (New York, Abrams, 1987), 146-147.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, (New York, Abrams, 1987), 146.

However, in the Apse the level of evasive mono-complexity (given the uniform shading in which the one somber value dominates the complex visual arena) also challenges preconceptions of legibility based on our ability to identify and locate figures in their ground. This made me wonder if the visualization space I was in was not perhaps a training spot for the hunters to improve their discerning vision, so as to aid them in visually discovering animals from within their tangled natural camouflage. But assuredly, artistic vision in the Apse is not only aimed at the controlling power over animals in nature, but on the contrary, vision itself seems engulfed in nature's womb.

Perhaps the symbolic concentration of figurative obscurity here is a sort of idealized schematic through which finding actions became imaginable. For truly the creative act of visualization was immediately obvious to me on entering the immersive Apse, where there is always more to find by moving the head.

Art of noise aesthetics (first articulated by the Italian Futurist painter-musician Luigi Russolo) is hypothetical in the recognition of our sheer potential. Understanding and enjoying the art of noise implies that we are more various than we had imagined; and more tolerant than presumed. An almost un-photographable non-optical noise aesthetic was chosen by the anonymous collective of highly skilled artists at work here ~ just look at those elegant, thin, finely drawn lines ~ when they, generation after generation, created this incredible immersive art of noise chamber in a groin of the Grotte de Lascaux.

I should note that it is common to find prehistoric stones incised with a jumble of overlapping animal drawings in no apparent order, piled on-top of one another to the point of illegibility.<sup>8</sup> However, the Apse's brimful-room of noise aesthetics is unprecedented, save for certain panels in Les Trois Frères and at the cave of Combarelles, a nearby Périgord cavern which I subsequently visited. But generally, the Apse has been ignored by art theoreticians and prehistorians. I believe there is still only one widely published scholarly investigation of it per se, by Denis Vialou in Arlette Leroi-Gourhan's book *Lascaux Inconnu*<sup>9</sup> even though Abbé André Glory<sup>10</sup> spent several

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<sup>8</sup> Leroi-Gourhan, André. 1968. *The Art of Prehistoric Man in Western Europe*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Denis Vialou in Arlette Leroi-Gourhan, *Lascaux Inconnu*, (Paris, C.N.R.S., 1979)

<sup>10</sup> By 1963, Abbé André Glory identified nearly 1,500 images in Lascaux and produced nearly 120 sq. meters of tracings.

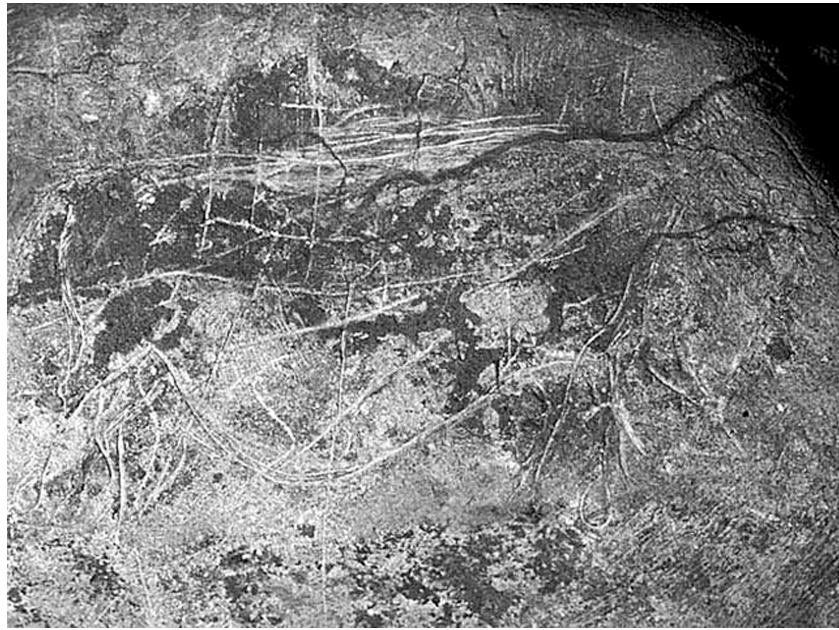
years trying to decipher this inextricable chamber. This is because nowhere is the eye permitted to linger over any clear image, even though it holds an immense 2.5 meter engraving of an animal in its midst. Rather, the gaze faces an all-inclusive flood of sublimated optic information. Open minded visual stamina is called for here. Without it, there is almost nothing seen. Yet, when looked long at, the Apse holds a phantasmagorical semi-legible index of all of the forms of animal representation found scattered throughout the entire cave, thus making it Lascaux's image index.

Its conceptual frenzy may seem cryptic and foreboding to us, but its over-all, hyper-totalizing, palimpsest iconographic character has a fecund boundlessness too. Images explode into overlapping totalities from which, when sustained visual attention is maintained, other unexpected configurations may visually emerge. I find this a situation ripe for divinational gazing, an ocular technique based on surpassing visual expectations that takes the unclear seriously as a conduit to probabilities. As documented by historians, ethnographers, and cultural anthropologists; non-sequential magical gazing is a global and persistent aspect of human cultures. In the Apse, animals are superimposed in chaotic discourse, some fully and carefully rendered, others unfulfilled and left open to penetration by the environment. All commingled with an extraordinary confused jumble of lines including, remarkably, the sole claviform sign in the Périgord,<sup>11</sup> a common symbol in Paleolithic European art sometimes described by archaeologists as a stylized female figure. And, even more remarkably, Lascaux's only reindeer; an animal which existed in plenitude during the period of the adornment of Lascaux. Its extensive use of superimposed multiple-operative optic perception<sup>12</sup> presents the viewer with no single point of reference, no orientation, no top, no bottom, no left, no right, and no separate parts to its whole. As a result, I had the peculiar feeling of being flooded over by a cloud-like image of negative excess. Impenetrable mystery hovered before me. As such, this chaotic negativity seemed an imposition onto Paleolithic culture of the very thing that should unstable it: nihilism. Nihilism in that it is no longer a matter of appreciating heterogeneous figuration, but of scanning a homogeneous crisscrossing and oscillating battle scene occurring between interwoven figures, immersed in the ground from which they emerged. This is a deliberate rendering of figuration in play with disfiguration.

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<sup>11</sup> Arlette Leroi-Gourhan, *Lascaux Inconnu*, (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1979), p. 315.

<sup>12</sup> optic perception unifies objects in a spatial continuum



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux wall area



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux surface area

There is no empty space outside of the figures to clearly define them, and hence, in a mental reversal, space is immersed in the overlapping figures. The nihilistic cancellation at work here then seemed to be an attempt to deny the validity of subject/object understanding. And to deny that any visual erudition of anything whatsoever is possible in the interests of the imaginative ferment we now call art.

I was inside an immersive art of noise site of overrunning flux and hybridization. An excessive place for the rejection of visual realism. The Apse then represents for me a



thrusting off of optic and mental boundaries and thus is a complex mirroring of our own fleeting impressions which constitute the movement of our consciousness. The perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves. Within its frenzy, I felt not static, but inside a hot space of creation that carries its own nihilistic opposite within.

Particularly dense with the frenzy of overlapping imagery is the part of the Apse called the *Absidiole* - a small, niche-like hollow (again like the semi-spherical small niches which house holy relics in Romanesque basilicas) just in front of the drop into the well documented Pit. By putting my head into it, I could feel the chaotic play of multiple immersive visionary envelopes; a feeling consistent with the Dadaist belief that “art will always be born only from the chaos of time”<sup>13</sup> by gazing at an excess of multiple possibilities in the now. For Raoul Hausmann, a founding member of the Berlin Dada group, a Dada person recognizes no past or future, but instead lives in an overwhelming present. For him, the role of the Dada artist “was to forge practices that would reveal the profound ambiguity of the present.”<sup>14</sup> Of course this phantasmagorical sphere of gazing is essentially a rejection of the tyranny of labels, essential identities, and fixed ideas. It is what allows art to construct unstable distinctions between subjects and objects.

The motivational force which quickens the Apse then seems a desire to undermine perpetual vision and replace it with another type of vulnerable vision, or at least to suggest that there may be other types of vision possible. Thus its nihilistic excess serves the positive function of questioning the validity of the customary appearance of things, and to make connective understanding inextricably felt.

If so, the basic function of the visual turbulence of the Apse is to precisely shake convictions that visual renderings are sound evidence, and to hold any such assured convictions in suspension. Hence formal issues, where consciousness may be said to be self-referential and self-sufficient, arise over humanist narratives, as the Apse is more concerned with a cycling of negative energy into positive energy than with optically

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<sup>13</sup> Stavrinaki, M. (2016) *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art and History*, translated from French by Daniela Ginsburg, Stanford University Press, p. 9

<sup>14</sup> Stavrinaki, M. (2016) *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art and History*, translated from French by Daniela Ginsburg, Stanford University Press, p. 9

correct astuteness. Hence, freed from representational obligations, dark chaotic powers of consciousness are unleashed. Repressed excessive exuberance aids in an act of creative frenzy.

This creative noise frenzy must have been deemed necessary and desirable only precisely here in the Apse, as in the other galleries superimposed images of animals respected the marks previous laid down and sensitively incorporated them into the ensuing hybrid compositions. I think I know why. By ransacking representational vision so, the Apse paradoxically partakes in the category typical of major art (regardless of its marginal standing within Prehistory) as it seemingly rejects the iconic figurative tradition in order to reinvent figuration as abstract meta-(or supra)-representation. Thus it is major in the way that John Cage's musical composition/non-composition 4'33" is<sup>15</sup> in forcing us to astutely consider silence as sound. As such, it is a meditation on fullness and emptiness: on the emptiness of fullness and the fullness of emptiness. And this is its key artistic and spiritual value.

Its overlapping stockpiled drawings, when sustained visual attention is maintained, produce unexpected configurations. New nonexistent, but visualized, forms emerge. The imagination is utilized. That is magical gazing.

Animal contour lines are superimposed in chaotic discourse, some fully and carefully rendered, others unfulfilled and left open to penetration by the environment, all commingling. The Apse's extensive use of chaotic superimposition presents the viewer with no single point of reference and no separate parts to its whole. Such visual-thought can be called homo-spatial, as according to Albert Rothenberg, in his book *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science and Other Fields*, homo-spatial thought is visual-thought "outside of space or spatiality" which "transcends differentiation."<sup>16</sup> This homo-spatial quality of thinking, which is concerned with the superimposition or fusion

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<sup>15</sup> 4'33" (pronounced: Four minutes, thirty-three seconds) is a three-movement composition by American experimental composer John Cage composed in 1952, for any instrument or combination of instruments. The score instructs the performer(s) not to play their instrument(s) during the entire duration of the piece throughout the three movements. The piece consists of the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while it is performed although it is commonly perceived as four minutes thirty-three seconds of silence. The title of the piece refers to the total length in minutes and seconds of a given performance, 4'33" being the total length of the first public performance.

<sup>16</sup> Rothenberg, A. 1979. *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science and Other Fields*. Chicago: University of Chicago, p. 342.

of opposites (in this case objective representation and nonobjective abstraction) within the same surface space, is deeply suggestive of expanded human consciousness itself.

Within the nihilistic boundlessness of the Apse, easy conceptions of one beautiful being as distinguished from another in specificity are denied and an eccentric invalidation takes place where previous concepts of the finite and the infinite implode, as do concepts of the voluminous and the vacuous, into a unified field of multiple disembodied existences. It's representational depictions and anti-depictions are neither here nor there; but overlap beautifully everywhere.



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux surface area

I know that what I am saying about the Apse runs counter to the heart of positivism, as the positivist ideal is a search for rational, systematic thought where images can be broken down, explored, understood, and explained. But in the Apse, I seem to have encountered an irrational visual system that critiques reason and the modern positivist attitude towards sensation. I was inside an immersive field of overrunning flux and hybridization. A place to save thought from the futile claims of dogmatic realism and rationalism. Freed from representational obligations, dark chaotic powers of creative consciousness were unleashed via the Apse's repressed but excessive exuberance.

When interpreting my immersion in the chaos of the Apse, we must remember that even the simplest perceptual activity of viewing discrete images utilizes higher-level

cognitive activity, as perceiving anything involves description and inference. Indeed perception utilizes a plethora of built-in assumptions and hypotheses, as it fills in absent information and draws conclusions based on (but not reducible to) incoming data in terms of part/whole regions and figure/ground relations from which there eventually emerges a preferred percept.

Keeping in mind that the human's natural field of view is roughly 120° vertical by 180° horizontal, and that the Apse's perceptual-field far exceeds these parameters, the resulting flooding-over effect of the Apse (which is significant in creating the overwhelming immersive effect of its virtual reality – something not transferable through rectangular flat photography) accounts for some of the magical visual power encountered here. But also on scanning the intricate and perplexing spread of the Apse, I could not but sense that in some way I was looking at and immersed in a representation of the metaphysics of orgasm and/or death. That by engaging with its visual tangle I was looking sex/death in the eye. To be, or not to be: that is the paradigmatic choice when visualizing form into and out of existence when examining the elusive nihilistic alternatives made manifest here. Being, beings, or nothingness: all are tentative conditions of resolution (or forestalled resolution) here; all spout ontological alternatives in an apparent desire to achieve and contemplate radical negation.

Archaeologists are continuously trying to understand the marks left here from that inaccessible epoch. They analyze its disheveled iconography in hopes of ascertaining why this tangled impulse was created. Most do not see that the Apse defies the common assumption that visual art is associative. That art is based on the human mental capability to make one thing stand in for and symbolize another, in agreement with society. The usual assumption is that art-marks on a surface denote content, not just to the mark-maker, but to others as well. Even here the chaotic Apse turns assumptions on their head. What I learned about the Apse is that its dynamic cluster of representational/anti-representational boundlessness was worked and reworked over the span of many centuries. However, by no means do all of the superimposed figures date from different times. Thus their overlapping is not a simplistic function of time. Thus its intentionality assumes a certain degree of conceptual lucidity. This was no haphazard drawing pad. But if the Apse functioned as a mnemonic or anti-mnemonic devise, as a training site for hunters or artists, or as a philosophical site of non-being

severed from any practical purpose, I can never really know. But it is my hypothesis that, for whatever reason, the palimpsest chamber functions as a dissonant visualization field suitable for divinational gazing into ideas around abundant reproduction and its disappearance.

Most of our cognitive functions and perceptual processes are carried out by the neocortex (the largest part of the human brain). The primary visual cortex is the part of the neocortex that receives visual input from the retina. I conjecture that the subterranean visualization process at work in the Apse may have been to feedback optic stimulus to the neocortex in an attempt to gaze into the future and the past, as this process of feed-backing frustratingly homogeneous and heterogeneous stimulus simultaneously to the neocortex is roughly the basis for magical gazing. It is imaginable that such an inner seeing enterprise would be deemed of help in prognosticating the movements of herds of game, which would facilitate the success of the hunt, for to deal with a cluster of spirit-images on a wall is in some sense to snare and overpower the image and, ultimately, to have human power over it. Thus I speculate that the Apse served the prehistoric self in experiencing itself as capacity rather than existential identity. Where the evaluation of self has been expanded from bound to boundless. Such consciousness represents a paradigm shift which relativizes other recognitions of self-consciousness outside any determinate state. This is the body self-understood in terms of its vast potential.

This creative scenario suggests a merging of awareness into first a more restricted, and then an expanded, intensity. Thus it is possible to say that such a state of manifestation is distinguished according to the degree to which potentiality is energized through restriction. In that muddy realm, deceased ancestors, imagined deities, and miscellaneous creatures await.

If one accepts most of what I have said thus far as concerning the alteration of consciousness in the Apse, I may now surmise that this altered consciousness of nihilistic chaos and repressed excess is an unleashing liberation and a breaking free from the world's ordinary representational space. This conceptual act is one where one not only transcends narrow conceptual territories, but where one also frees oneself from desires for the familiar experience of everyday life. Radical courage is uncovered.

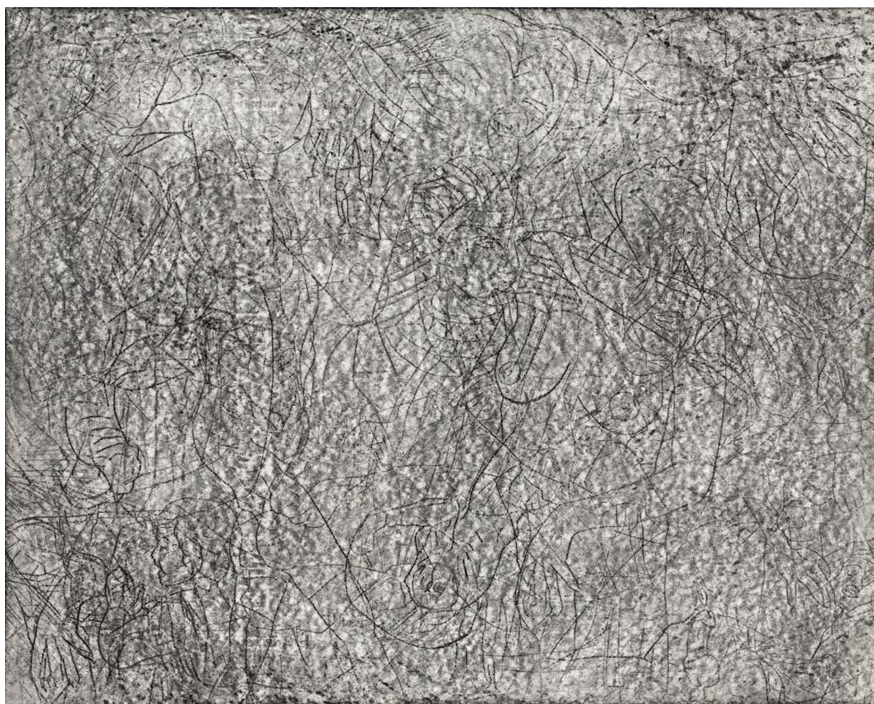
Perhaps supporting such a theory of courage is the so-called sorcerer panel in the cave of Trois Frères, also in the French Pyrenees. Deep underground in a cramped cavern (like the Apse) a rendered half-human/half-animal figure dominates the space. The human/animal figure is staring directly out of the wall, which is unusual for Upper Paleolithic cave art. Just underneath are several heavily engraved panels: a commotion of animal figures with no apparent order or pattern (as in the Apse). In the midst of this chaos of muddled excess is another human/animal figure and directly in front of this image is a reindeer's hind-legs and rear-end, with its female sex prominently displayed. The sacred/sexual potency is palpable.

My tenuous explanations for the dark excess I found in the Apse cannot be proven, nor, I think, disproven, and thus remain moot, if fascinating. Though obviously imbued with meaning, we unfortunately are unlikely ever to know the true meaning or function of that image-space. What I know though is how the visual noise of the Apse operated on me. What it did was to collapse popular human image making into an inclusive and excessive virtual climax where creative ferment and self-indulgence are concurrent. What additionally fascinated me is that this fine jumble of delicate lines, some beautifully representational and others again not, corresponded to the prolonged series of gray drawing with which I began my career as an artist some forty years ago: drawings, such as *Uplifting* (1983) 11 x 14" graphite on paper, which had partially been conceived of as an apocalyptic shadow of our nervous system's meshed neural signals. That aesthetic of latent excess is still with me today, as can be seen in a recent painting *Forest Murmurs of Groundless Orlando* (2020).





Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux surface area



Joseph Nechvatal, Uplifting (1983) 11 x 14", graphite on paper





Joseph Nechvatal, Forest Murmurs of Groundless Orlando (2020) 2x2m, painting on canvas



Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux surface area detail

## Resources:

Images (enhanced by black & white & contrast by the author) of the Abside of the Grotte de Lascaux courtesy of the Lascaux French Cultural Minister website

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